

## Dialogue

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*Beyond Hula, Hotels, and Handicrafts:  
A Pacific Islander's Perspective of Tourism Development*

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*An Interview with* ALBERT WENDT

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**A**LBERT WENDT IS A NOVELIST AND POET. Born in Western Samoa, he is now Professor of English at Auckland University, New Zealand. He has taught at Samoa College and at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji. Regarded by many as the Pacific's most talented writer, Wendt has written five novels, two collections of short stories, and two collections of poetry. Two of his books, *Sons for the Return Home* and *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree*, have been made into feature films. *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, his third novel, won the prestigious New Zealand Wattie Book of the Year award for 1980. Wendt has also edited an anthology of Pacific writing entitled *Lali* and written numerous scholarly articles for various magazines and journals.

On his way back to New Zealand after research work in the mainland United States, he visited the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Representing THE CONTEMPORARY PACIFIC, Vilsoni Hereniko and David Hanlon interviewed him on 4 February 1992. The agreed time was 4 PM. Armed with our tape-recorder and beer, we took the lift at Lincoln Hall to Room 307. Two knocks. No answer. Did we come on the wrong day? The wrong hour perhaps? Then we heard some shuffling, and a voice saying he was on his way. The door opened to reveal the writer. Apologizing (we had woken him up), he directed us to the corner of the room nearest the window. As we sat down on the settee, the writer disappeared to change. We set up our equipment and reviewed our notes. . . . Albert Wendt reappeared wearing a pair of dark green slacks and a dark blue T-shirt. We made small talk as he opened three bottles of Steinlager then passed each of us a beer. He sat on the chair opposite us and crossed his legs at the knees.

How should we begin? Is there a fresh approach to yet another imposition on the writer's precious time? We decided to depart from our list of questions and improvise.

TCP Do you usually get asked the same questions every time you're interviewed?

AW Yes, but the answers are different as you get older.

TCP You mean your opinions change?

AW They have to change. I used to be dogmatic when I was younger. Not now, because opinions aren't really that important (laughs).

TCP What are you less dogmatic about now?

AW Some things have remained constant. My analysis of the colonial situation in the Pacific is still the same. But I'm not as angry these days, now that I'm reaching middle age and feeling defeatist (laughs). Encroaching middle age has made me more willing to compromise and to go with the flow. But my views on colonialism remain the same.

TCP What are those views?

AW Whenever I go to a country, I always try to find out about the indigenous people of that country. On the mainland, I kept looking for the native Americans. But in many areas they have been erased. Then you come to a place like Hawai'i and you see Polynesian Hawaiians: they are now a small minority in their own country, at the bottom of the economic ladder.

TCP So the rot that you referred to in an early article you once wrote is spreading?

AW The rot has gotten worse. The attack in "A Sermon on Rot" was about colonialism and the power groups in the Pacific, people of privilege and power. In fact, in most independent island nations, the political elites are now exploiting our own people. In some cases, it's worse now than under colonial rule. But I don't harp on that any more. As I've said, in my encroaching old age, I'm more forgiving (laughs). I can't do much to change the situation. When I was in Samoa a few weeks ago to visit my father who is now eighty-four, what I saw made me want to weep. The corruption is more open than before. But that doesn't make the country less spiritual for me. I still love Samoa, most of my extended family live there, and I still identify with Samoa. But it's no longer the holy center of my world, the world from which I draw my spiritual strength. New Zealand has become my second home. (Fiji is too, to some extent, because I spent quite a long period there.) But if someone said to me that I couldn't go back to Samoa, I wouldn't miss it too much, for a while.

TCP Do you see the extension of the right of suffrage in Western Samoa as a gain or advantage?

AW Yes. I fought for universal suffrage in Samoa many, many years ago. When I was a high school teacher and ran the newspaper there, I advocated universal suffrage in the paper. But now that I've seen some of the effects of universal suffrage, I'm a little doubtful. Don't misunderstand me, I still believe in the right of everyone to vote, even though I understand that in the last election there was widespread corruption. Instead of just buying the votes of the *matai*, candidates now buy the votes of anyone who is over eighteen. I've been told that political corruption is much worse now; but it's not the fault of universal suffrage, it's the way the system is being abused.

TCP And Fiji? How do you see postcoup Fiji?

AW I haven't been to Fiji since the coups. I've tried to follow the events there by talking with some of my Fijian friends who come to New Zealand. I read about Fiji in the newspapers and magazines. In some ways, I predicted what happened in Fiji. Some Fijians and Indians claimed that Fiji was very stable politically (laughs). I've never believed that. My first visit to Fiji was in 1952, when I was returning to Samoa after having been away in New Zealand. I grew up in New Zealand with some Fijians who became prominent in Ratu Mara's government. I knew from them that the racial situation in Fiji wasn't going to be stable, politically. And years later, when I shifted to live and teach in Fiji, I realized that the country was not going to be stable, in the long run.

When the Fiji coup happened, there was enormous sympathy for the coup among indigenous people throughout the Pacific, including the Maori, Samoans, Cook Islanders, and Tongans. You might say this reaction is very racist, but you can't help the way people feel. The coup proved my belief that Fiji was politically unstable and will be for quite a while. You can't just hope that two different groups of people trying to live together will get to love each other.

TCP What about the second coup?

AW I believe that the second coup was carried out by Rabuka against the Fijian leadership, against Ratu Mara and Ratu Penaia Ganilau. I was actually told that by people who were close to Rabuka.

TCP What do you see as a possible solution to the racial conflicts in Fiji?

AW Marriage between Indians and Fijians. It's a pity that the rate of intermarriage between the two races has been low. If I have grandchildren from such mixed marriages, I won't advocate sending them out of the country, no matter how racist I am. We just have to hope that the Fijians and Indians will eventually come to like and trust one another—that will take a long time. Fiji is not unique, of course. Malaysia is in exactly the same situation. That's probably why Ratu Mara likes analyzing Malaysia.

The coup was painful for many people, particularly for Indians. I was in Fiji during that time. I was offered the Auckland position at the end of 1986, so I didn't have to be in Fiji, but I decided to go back to Fiji to finish my term there. My family and I suffered, living through the coups, but I learned a hell of a lot. I learned about fear and what it is, about inhumanity and what happens when it gets out of hand, about how easy it is to think it's normal to see soldiers around every day, to have your car stopped every day, to have some of your friends arrested. I was beginning to think that this was a normal condition of life, until I left Fiji. I was glad to get out. I was getting immune to those abuses and inhumanities.

TCP There were rumors around the University of the South Pacific campus that you were pro-coup. Were you aware of this?

AW I was not pro-coup. I don't believe in military coups. This rumor came about because of the volatile Fiji situation and my political views about indigenous peoples. I don't believe in the use of military force to obtain anything. But my heart and my sympathies are with the indigenous people. Now, you can interpret that any way you want to, but that doesn't mean I was pro-coup. I understand why the Fijians did it; I'm not excusing it.

I understand too why the indigenous people around the Pacific sympathized with the coup. I mean, look what's happened to the Aborigines, the Maori, the Hawaiians!

TCP Did you feel alienated by some of your friends or colleagues during this time because of your beliefs?

AW I didn't care (laughs). It didn't matter what I believed or what I did, they were still going to say I was pro-coup. You know what happens in Fiji, particularly at that university—anything to attack somebody. That's

one of the reasons I was glad to get out of Fiji, not because of the coup, but because I would be free of the perpetual "problem" between the Fijians and the Indians!

TCP And New Zealand? Are you encouraged at all by recent developments there?

AW I totally and fully support the Maori cause, the drive by Maori people for self-determination. I have no doubts about my stand; it doesn't matter how this is interpreted by Pakeha.

At the moment, the Maori renaissance is the strongest rebirth of indigenous culture in the whole of the Pacific, or anywhere in the world that I've been. Contemporary developments in art among the Maori are the richest ever in the history of indigenous peoples in the Pacific. Dance, film, art, sculpture, poetry—the Maori art movement is quite fabulous. Of course, all this is part of the political struggle. All this is very encouraging for the Maori people. But because the Maori are outnumbered, the struggle will take many, many years, if they ever achieve their goal. I don't know of any Maori who doesn't want self-determination.

TCP What about Samoans in New Zealand? How do they fit into the Maori circle?

AW Early last year, representatives from all Pacific communities held a meeting in Auckland. All representatives, except one, were totally in support of the recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi. There may be tensions between Pacific Islanders and Maori, but there is enormous support, particularly among New Zealand-born Pacific Islanders, for recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi, and the right of the Maori to self-determination.

TCP Do you see parallels with the Hawai'i situation?

AW Of course, maybe the Hawaiian movement is not as strong as the Maori struggle yet, but there are now links between all these indigenous activist groups, and among Maori and Hawaiian artists as well. When I say Hawaiian, I'm referring only to Polynesian Hawaiians. There are strong links with Canadian native Americans as well. So the indigenous peoples are trying to help one another.

TCP One very noticeable aspect of the sovereignty movement here is the influential role of women. Is this true of the Maori movement as well?

AW Yes. Women make up the strongest group in the leadership. Larger numbers than here as well.

TCP Do you know why?

AW The reason is simple. Indigenous women are discriminated against doubly—as women, and as Maori or Hawaiian. They have suffered more than the men. It's the women who have kept the families going in the whole struggle. That's why when they turn their attention to organizing the movement, they're far stronger than the men. Men are easily bought by the system, with knighthoods and power (laughs). That's true, very true. The women keep going, they last longer in the struggle, because they have to keep the families together. Daily, the women watch their families being destroyed, in the streets and in the jails.

For instance, the majority of the jail population in New Zealand is predominantly Polynesian, over 60 percent of the jail population in New Zealand is Maori and Pacific Islander, under forty-five, most of them. Now, that's horrendous, isn't it? It's not because the indigenous people are innately criminal (laughs). In America, per head of ethnic population the jail population is mainly Black or Hispanic. In Australia, they're predominantly Aboriginal. One of my Maori friends recently made a public statement in New Zealand saying that the Maori people go through the best university education in the world. Someone asked him what that system was. He said, "The New Zealand prison system" (laughs).

TCP It's a pity all that energy couldn't be channeled into the movement, in a creative way.

AW Some of it is.

TCP Do you have any thoughts or comments on the way history is practised or taught in the Pacific Islands?

AW Pacific Islanders should write their own histories, their own versions of their history. Histories written by outsiders, no matter how fair they've been, are still views of foreigners, still views of other people about us. In many ways, those histories have imposed on us views of ourselves that have added to our colonization. We should write our own histories in order to be free of those histories written about us, those images created by other people about us, not only in history books, but in fictions they've written about us. The Irish did it after three hundred years of English

colonialism. You see, a lot of Haole and Pakeha forget that their ancestors were colonized. And a lot of them are surprised when you say to them, "Well, how come you're colonizing another country?" They don't think they are colonizing. They might say, "I'm very liberal, I love the indigenous people, and the history I've just written is very fair." You have to look very closely at that claim!

TCP Do you think then that one of the ugliest aspects of the larger colonial process is that it takes formerly colonized people and turns them into colonizers?

AW Yes. In many ways, we are turned into colonizers accidentally. For instance, the Anglo-Saxon settlers who came to the Pacific were the colonizers initially. Their children were born and bred here. They now claim they are indigenous, but the real indigenous people say they're not. And fifth generation white New Zealanders feel very bad about it. They don't feel good when they are told that New Zealand is not their country.

Once in Australia, I was drinking with a couple of Aboriginal friends when a couple of white Australians joined us. When I asked how long they had been in Australia, one of them said he was very proud that he was fifth generation Australian. He forgot who he was talking to. My Aboriginal friends responded, "Oh, you're one of the newcomers then" (laughs). What is five generations compared to sixty thousand years? The Aborigines meant it as a joke and also as a way of putting things in perspective.

TCP Do you see works of fiction as attempts to put things in perspective too?

AW Yes. Novels present the most complex histories that have been written. Let's take America. To understand America, I would much rather read fiction about America, the really great novels written by Americans about Americans. I learn more about what Americans are like, where they came from, perhaps where they're going, from fiction than I would learn from history books. And that's what I do before I go to a country, I try to read that country's fiction, and maybe one or two histories. Up to now, the novels written about the Pacific, for me, are far more meaningful than even some of the histories written by our own people. Novels are complex histories, because in a novel you try and bring out the complexity in the characters. You don't set out deliberately to analyze the national personality of the country. You simply write about interesting people. And if you



write about them well, you will bring out some of the features of the people of that country.

For example, even though at present I am very interested in the techniques of the so-called discontinuous narrative, which is not new to oral storytelling, my main interest in writing fiction is still characterization. The novels that I still enjoy are the novels that have memorable characters. After you've finished reading such novels, you still remember these characters.

TCP What is it that fiction is able to capture, but nonfiction seems unable . . .

AW I don't see much difference between fiction and nonfiction. It's all fiction—that's if you define fiction as something that you make up. I mean, there is a lot of fiction in a history book, you invent and select. But you justify it by saying you are basing it on certain historical facts that you have discovered. When you've done all the research and you sit down and write it up, the process is like writing a novel. It's based totally on selection, your ideology, and what you as a person deem important. The same process is true for the novel. For me now, there is no difference between autobiography and fiction. There is very little difference between fiction and nonfiction. It all depends on the way you tell it.

TCP Are you suggesting then that we get rid of these categories in our literature courses, including distinctions such as short story, drama, poetry, and so on?

AW Somebody once said that literature is what is taught at universities, it's what literature teachers choose to teach. That is true. That's why I don't believe in teaching the so-called great books, because such books change from generation to generation. I just teach the literature that I like, and I hope that the students get to like it, and I hope it teaches them ways of looking at other books, and then they can go ahead and read whatever they want. And if they think a certain book is great, they can call it great. But teaching a course called great books—I don't go for that. Because if you look at the list of those great books, they are usually very ethnocentric. That's why I don't prescribe a list of great books, because when I look back at books that I liked ten years ago, I think, man (laughs), why did I think they were any good at the time?

TCP How does what you read transfer . . .

AW Into my fiction? Almost everything I read gets transferred to my writing, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously. You will notice this in *Ola*. I usually let the experience settle for a while, then I rework it in my own philosophical way. In my novel *Black Rainbow*, an allegorical thriller set primarily in Auckland, my friends' names are in it, my favorite writers are in it too. They appear as street names or names of buildings. . . . Some of the villains in it are taken from other books, and so on. I had a lot of fun with it. It's a very serious novel, but it's also not that serious. Depends on how you define serious. For the last few years, I haven't really cared what people think of my work.

TCP You have no use for critics?

AW I'm not saying that, no. There are some critics I like and some critics I dislike intensely, because they are very unfair in their criticism. I don't mind criticism that's well thought out and not tainted by racism or malice. I don't mind it at all. Publishing my books is not that important now. I'm not in a hurry to get them published. I wasn't in a hurry to get my novel *Ola* published . . . it took me ten years. My first novel in ten years, but a lot of that delay had to do with the fact that I was writing three other novels, and *Ola* finished first.

TCP Do you find it gets easier each time?

AW No. It gets more interesting, trying out new tricks and new ways of narrating the story. I'm not that interested now in well-fashioned novels. It's very easy for me to do that. In *Ola* I break it all up, it doesn't really matter if it works or not . . . (laughs).

TCP What is the reaction to *Ola* in New Zealand?

AW Mixed, some very good, some very negative criticisms, mainly from middle-aged white men. It's funny that though the main character in the novel is a woman, the magazines and the journals have not had the book reviewed by middle-aged women. The main character in *Ola* is a middle-aged Samoan woman; so why didn't they give it to a Pacific Island or Maori woman? Some of the criticisms in New Zealand that I objected to very much were tainted by racism and anti-Semitism.

The section on New Zealand is hard hitting about racism in New

Zealand. That's actually the section that most New Zealanders don't like, but they won't come out and say that section really hurt them. Instead they attack the Israeli section. They say that I'm politically incorrect about Israel: How come I attack the white races here but support the Israelis? Well, they have misread the novel, because in the Israeli section, in the main character's head, this question keeps appearing, "What about the Palestinians? What about the Palestinians?" I could have written about another hundred pages on the Palestinians. Plus, I had to pursue the two main characters' perceptions of Israel and not my own—how this old man, who has never been outside Samoa, who has always loved the Holy Land, sees Israel. I had to pursue his way of seeing, also that of his daughter who is a modern, middle-aged Samoan woman, very widely traveled, and disillusioned with the world.

Some of the criticisms of the Israeli section were tainted with anti-Semitism. A lot of Jewish people in New Zealand came out in support of *Ola*. *Ola* is written in such a way that you can like the section on Samoa and the section on Israel, and not like the sections on New Zealand, America, or Japan. My children, and my friends who have read the book, like some sections but not others. *Ola* tries a lot of things. I've learned from it, and some of the things I've learned I use in *Black Rainbow*. I'm very pleased with the way *Ola* is narrated.

TCP What was the inspiration for *Ola*?

AW I actually use in that novel a lot of the experiences I gained through traveling. All the countries in which that novel is set, I've been to. So a lot of those experiences were my own experiences, but redone in fictional terms. All of my novels are, to some extent, autobiographical. And there's nothing wrong with acknowledging it. There's actually nothing wrong with acknowledging that you're heavily influenced by other writers. The whole modernist approach is to find your own voice and not acknowledge that you owe it to someone else. That's rubbish. I used to believe that (laughs). I don't now. Someone asked me why I have the main character in *Ola* as a woman. . . . Well, that's the way the novel came to me, even though I use a lot of my own travel experiences in the book. Twice I tried to rewrite the total novel from the viewpoint of a man. I knew I was taking an enormous risk at this time and age to write from the viewpoint of a middle-aged woman, but strangely, in New Zealand, I have not been attacked by feminists. Some of my strong feminist friends in New Zealand

really liked the book, even though they still believe that men should not write from the viewpoint of women (laughs). They believe that, but they said they really liked *Ola*.

Recently, a letter came from one of New Zealand's leading writers for teenage girls. She wanted me to write a short story with a young girl as the main character for her new anthology of stories for young girls. This was because she liked *Ola*. Some of the most loving letters I have received have been from people—many of them women—who say they see themselves in *Ola*, in her life and spirit. There are a lot of Pacific Island and Maori women who are *Ola*'s age, who are widely traveled, who were educated overseas, colonized, and who have tried to break out of the whole colonial condition, who have liked *Ola*. And a lot of men in my generation who have been through these experiences like it too. Some critics in New Zealand, in their own racist way, forget that a lot of Pacific Islanders, like *Ola*, are very widely traveled, very well educated, and very sophisticated about the world. *Ola* is not an exception. I was interviewed on TV in New Zealand. The female interviewer aggressively said that I was very tough on white New Zealanders. And then she said she couldn't believe in *Ola*, because *Ola* was a superwoman. And I said, "What do you mean, superwoman?" She said "She is incredible." And I said, "Well, it's obvious you don't know very many women" (laughs).

Without my intending it, *Ola* has turned out to be a novel about a generation of people who are now middle-aged, a generation that now runs the world and are to blame for what's gone wrong with it. In the novel, when *Ola* is in Samoa, she talks about her generation, who now run Samoa. She goes overseas, and that's the generation she meets in Israel, in America, Japan. It turns out to be a novel about that generation, irrespective of the fact that *Ola* is Samoan. It's also a novel about old age, encroaching old age, and approaching death. That is seen through the experiences of *Ola*'s father and his death in the novel. Old age can be one of the worst fears of suffering anyone can go through. Here's a man who has never been sick in his life, and then, in his old age, everything hits him. I was trying to resolve, without realizing it, my own fears about death and old age. There are parts in *Ola* that I love very much, and there are parts that I would rewrite now. People fail to realize that there are large groups of indigenous people in the Pacific and around the world who have been through *Ola*'s experience . . . .

TCP How would you characterize Pacific Island literature?

AW Well, the only definition I give it now is that it is writing by people who live in the Pacific Islands. The literature written by Samoans may be different from that written by Fijians, and so on. National literatures are emerging already. When I teach Pacific literature, I teach mainly the writing by the descendants of indigenous people.

TCP Do you think that part of the racism and sexism that is so prevalent is because writers, historians, whatever, are pigeonholed so that they are Samoan writers, women writers, and so on?

AW I don't mind being called a Samoan writer—that's what I call myself. When people ask how do you define that, I say it's because my passport says I am Samoan (laughs). You can talk about Black writers. . . . Black American writers definitely have their own characteristics, the way the language is used, for instance. If you read a New Zealand novel by a New Zealander, man or woman, you will find characteristics that you can identify as peculiar to a New Zealand writer. The same with the American novel. Those terms do have some meaning.

TCP If you're a Samoan writer, why is it that you don't write in the Samoan language?

AW It's a historical accident that we write in the language that we write in. I was born into a culture and family where the two languages were used. My father was the only one who spoke English in my home. Then it happened. I was just mastering the Samoan language when I had to go to school in New Zealand at the age of thirteen. Because I was there for such a long time, I became more fluent in the use of the English language than in Samoan. I began to write in English. As you know, it takes a long time to use any language well enough to write in. No matter how fluent you are in that language, if you don't use it in your writing, you won't be good at it. There's a hell of a lot of people who are fluent in English, but they're no good at writing novels because they haven't sat down over twenty or thirty years, like me, and tried to use the language that way.

If I decided tomorrow to write a novel in Samoan, it would take me a long time. My facility in the language is still good, but it would take me a long time to use it again, as well as I use English.

TCP But do you think that if you wrote in Samoan, more Samoans would read your novels?

AW I guess more Samoans would read them, yes. But you see, that's assuming that because you write in a certain language the people whose language it is will read your book. That's a myth (laughs). For instance, in America, which has a population of two hundred thirty million, a best-selling American novel would be something that sells twenty thousand copies, hardback. But twenty thousand out of a population of two hundred thirty million is a drop in the bucket, right? If you have a hundred Samoans out of a population of a hundred eighty thousand reading my novel, that's a best seller, right? (laughs). You know what I mean?

TCP Would you encourage literature in the vernacular though?

AW Oh, yes. I would encourage you to choose the language of the people themselves, their own language. I'm sure if I did write in Samoan, my insights into my own people would be much deeper because the Samoan language would better convey what Samoans are as people. When you're describing someone whose language is not English, you can go so far, but you cannot go all the way. If I translated my novels into Samoan, they would be very different. But never mind, even in English, I try to work out a style of language that includes some Samoan concepts. For instance, I always use the word *aiga* for family, even when I'm writing in English. There is no term in English that describes it. Most indigenous writers now don't bother to offer a glossary. They shouldn't. *Ola* has no glossary.

TCP Do you sometimes wish that politicians in Samoa would read, say, your novel *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* and take it seriously?

AW I don't really care. I'm so disillusioned with politicians, that I don't really care what they read. They don't read much of anything anyway. I'm being cynical now. No, I know the politicians in the Pacific, and I could name on one hand the ones who have read all my novels, but I won't name them.

When *Pouliuli* first came out, one of my best friends at the time was one of the leading politicians in Samoa—he eventually became the prime minister—read it, and said he liked it, but it was not accurate about the political situation in Samoa. The next election happened, and he stood again. After the election he said, "Al, that novel is perfect. It's actually true of

what's happening in our politics and elections." He was referring to the bribery and the violence.

If you describe what's happening to a certain group of people at a particular time accurately, you get some feel for what's going to happen in the immediate future. But I didn't set out to do that. For me *Pouliuli* is a gloomy novel (laughs). However, it remains the favorite novel of a lot of people.

TCP What happens when your writing is put on screen? How does that feel?

AW Well, the two films based on two of my books—I had nothing to do with the making of the movies. They were made by friends of mine. I kept out of it completely, to be fair to the directors and the people involved. But we're now planning to make the film of *Black Rainbow*, and I'm actually taking an active role. A friend of mine, Martyn Sanderson—he directed *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree*—he and I are writing the script for it.

TCP Were you satisfied with the films of your books?

AW I liked *Flying Fox*, very much. It's a marvelous film, considering they only had \$700,000 to make it. Martyn said if they had had a million, he would have been able to re-film certain sequences, make some scenes more opulent. For instance, when they were filming the trial scene, they didn't have enough money to even shift the camera to get more than two members of the audience in the courtroom.

TCP I was told that at a recent screening of *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree*, a Samoan man in the audience stood up and shouted in protest because he disagreed with some of the depictions of Samoa in the film, saying they were not accurate.

AW That's his view. *Flying Fox* is metaphysical. It's an existentialist view of human beings, and they happen to be Samoan (laughs).

TCP Perhaps the way the church is depicted is offensive to some Samoans.

AW That's why a lot of the older generation do not like my books—my books attack the church. Most of my *aiga* are very religious; I'm the only one who dropped out. I respect the church, but it's too powerful (laughs).

TCP What do you mean by the church being too powerful?

AW The church in Samoa is extremely powerful. It's also very powerful among the Samoan communities in Australia, New Zealand, Hawai'i, and America. Fundamentalist Christianity, which our people adhere to, is damaging. If you took away the Christian church today from Samoa, a lot of the *fa'a Samoa* would collapse. Our people took another religion from outside and put it into their system. You shouldn't blame the missionaries, like I used to when I was younger. Our people took the missionaries' god and put it in place of the ancient priests, and accorded the missionary and the pastor the same powers. Why blame the missionaries? Of course, the missionaries took advantage of our people's belief in religion. Religion in Samoa is a social custom, like it used to be in pre-European times.

It's a social custom, a very good social custom, and I observe it myself. For instance, when we were staying with relatives in the middle of Carson, one of the neighborhoods in LA, I found even the children, who are American born, are religious. Just before we left LA, we had a family barbecue. One of the elders said a prayer, and then we sang the Samoan hymn my father composed many years ago, a very famous hymn. Then someone farewelled us, and then we had a prayer. A *lotu* also is said in my father's house every day of the week. I love that, because every time I go home, I expect that at about half past six every evening. And it happens.

I have seven nephews and one niece in one branch of my family in LA. One of them is a civil engineer. The other has a degree in psychology. One has a degree in sociology. They've all done well. They were the first kids from Carson in the Samoan community to graduate from a university. This is a tribute to their mother who brought them up. She had to work at three jobs to put them through school and make sure they graduated. They were dying to find out about the history of their *aiga* in Samoa. They sat with me every evening and asked me questions about that.

TCP Do you think the family is still very important then?

AW As I get older, my *aiga* has become more and more important. When I talk about family, I don't mean just my immediate family. I mean my extended family, who in turn are connected to others.

The political scene in Samoa is very corrupt, the family system is used for corrupt purposes, you know the politics, but it is also used for a very good purpose. For instance, this journey for me these past six weeks has been a tremendous learning experience. My *aiga* has gone international,



but in a very good way. We're still all very close, so this trip has been one of discovering the new generation of my family now born and established overseas. They like the extended family system because within it they're protected and loved. Of course, like any other system, you get bastards within any family (laughs). You get people who are going to use the family system to benefit themselves.

TCP How would you compare it to the American family system, which if we believe what the social scientists say, is about to collapse, if it hasn't already?

AW I think families are changing in the Western world very quickly. I know that most families are now solo-parent families. When my wife and I broke up, it wasn't just me falling into space. My extended family came in and helped me through the whole crisis. The healing process, for me, has been much quicker than it would have been had I been left on my own to cope. This journey has allowed me to come to terms with all the places that my wife and I traveled to and through. With the help of my family, I've come to terms with the break-up of my marriage. I've always valued relatives and continue to value them now. What else have we got?

One of the most tragic things we have observed on this trip is the numbers of homeless people throughout America. Years ago, when I first came here, I saw them, but the numbers weren't so great. On this trip I saw homeless people everywhere in large numbers. Even in a small city like Santa Cruz, there were homeless people on the streets, attracted there by a warm climate.

On our way to the Bishop Museum today we drove past A'ala Park, with the tents. Bloody tragic. New Zealand faces a similar problem with homeless people as well. And it is copying America's policy of letting out the people from the mental homes, supposedly into middle houses, but there are no middle houses, so they actually end up in the streets. However, the situation in New Zealand isn't as bad as here. It's awful seeing whole families, husband, wife, and child on the street carrying notes saying "We'll accept food as payment for work." It's inexcusable in a society like America, but of course, the wealth of the rich is based on exploiting these people (laughs) and the rest of the world!

TCP Is it the things that move you, such as seeing homeless people on the street, that find their way into your writing?

AW Every time I travel, I write a long letter to my children. My present letter is now about forty pages long. Each night before I sleep, I write about what I see in my travels. I describe what I see and what I think about it. Rather than keeping a journal or notes, I usually write letters to my children, long letters, and then when I get home, I make photocopies for them and I keep the original. Sometimes I use these letters as a basis for my writing.

During my trip to China in eighty-seven, I wrote a 110-page letter to my children, which I then turned into a long essay on China. I never tried to publish it. I've turned it into a sequence of poems called "Night Flight." Usually, I leave the letters lying around, but sometimes I use them. It's a good exercise, just writing as it comes, without concern for grammar. Sometimes I rework a section. I don't know how my children react to these letters. . . . I think they know that I'm really writing letters to myself. Sometimes I write about my children's relatives in other parts of the world—I write down their names, how old they are, what children they've got, what kind of people they are. My children learn a lot about their relatives, particularly the young ones. My children are very interested in their own generation, the American generation.

TCP Who do you write for? Anyone in particular?

AW I try to write novels that I would like to read. After I finish one novel, I don't want to repeat that novel. I want to write another book that I would like. And if other people who read my books like them, good. If my friends and the people I love like them, that's even better.

TCP Does it scare you that you're likely to be the subject of biography some day?

AW It scares me a bit, but it doesn't really matter. Who cares, I'll be dead (laughs). But you see, the problem is, a biography can be very hurtful to my children and the people I love. So what I may do, when I get old, is burn all the papers and letters I've written.

TCP There was a time when there seemed to be a lot of fiction coming out of the Pacific. Is there more now or less, compared to the sixties and seventies?

AW It depends on which countries in the Pacific you are talking about. In New Zealand, Maori writers are still writing. But there aren't as many

young ones coming through, compared to the sixties and seventies. There aren't too many young ones writing in Fiji or Samoa.

TCP Was there a point in your life when you decided that writing was what you wanted to do, or did it happen gradually?

AW It happened gradually, and I found myself doing it more and more.

TCP Have you ever considered being anything besides a writer?

AW I could have done painting, but I stopped. Now, I regret not continuing to paint. One of the things that I go to look at when I travel is art. And of course, America now has the best collections of twentieth century art. When we were in New York, we went and saw the Museum of Modern Art. Five floors—and that's just the collection they have on display. We were able to see two floors. About half of what we saw I had seen in books and read about. I keep asking myself why I haven't continued to paint. I just don't have the time. Maybe if I were writing full time, and I had an income from somewhere to keep myself and my family alive, I would do some art again. But like writing, it takes a long time to be good at it.

TCP When you started writing, did you feel a strong sense of a role, or a mission as a writer?

AW At one stage, I thought that my writing would help change the world!

TCP You've given up on that?

AW For a while I did, but I still don't disbelieve that totally, because I know that some of my writing has changed the perceptions of some people. My perceptions are changed when I read a good novel or a good poem by someone else. If there are several human beings who are being changed by the same poem, then eventually you have a few whose perceptions have been affected. Also, it depends on what you mean by "changing the world." What I mean, basically, is that reading a good poem that describes a tree or the wind may change the way I see these elements. I don't mean huge political changes, but a slight altering of the way we see the world and the way we see ourselves. I know that some of my writing has changed some people, just as other people's writing has changed my perceptions. The danger is that a lot of people think that my works contain

sociological or historical information, which is fair enough, but they should not forget that it's fiction, that it's my construction (laughs).

TCP But you said earlier that everything is fiction, even histories.

AW Some fiction is true, it depends on whether you believe it or not! (laughs). For instance, I'm a movie addict, and I think the greatest changes in the way we think, the way we perceive the world, have been carried out by films. There's TV in the sitting room that goes twenty-four hours a day. It is changing how people perceive the world they live in. The technology of film has radically altered our way of looking at ourselves and the world, more so than anything else. Characters like Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, Superman, Green Hornet, the so-called world of fantasy, all these have made more impact than the so-called realities described by historians and psychologists.

Mickey Mouse is an international figure. He's influenced so many kids. I'm not being facetious. One of the best movies I've ever seen is *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Fantastic film. It's a perception of what reality is. What is reality? Is it the cartoon world or is it the so-called real world of human beings like you and me? That film destroyed this difference. The main detective was going in and out of the so-called cartoon world, and the cartoons were living in our world—that's actually true. I loved that film. I keep thinking about it, because it's a complex analysis of what is real and what is not real. And what that movie says is that everything is real. For instance, because I like reading novels, literature has influenced me more than anything else. Characters from a novel are more real to me than a lot of "real" people (laughs). Yet those characters are supposed to be fiction. That's why, for me, there's no difference between fiction and nonfiction. A Christian can say, "I believe in God and you should believe in it, too." But I don't believe in Christianity, therefore, for me, that is fiction. This is why, even though I say that art doesn't change people very much, in actual fact it does. For example, Shakespeare is studied all over the world; Shakespeare has changed so many people from different generations. Changes in ideas are more important than anything else.

TCP You mentioned Shakespeare—tell us, why is it that you have not published any plays?

AW I wrote two plays for the South Pacific Festival of Arts in 1972. I love reading plays, but when I go to the theater, most plays don't seem to work for me. So I read them, and I construct the play in my head.

I don't go to operas, because I find them artificial (laughs). Every art form is artificial, but some are more artificial than others. I love musicals, because they are less artificial. There's nothing more artificial to me than seeing a great big woman or a great big man sitting there singing, "Get me my lunch," or "Isn't the sunset beautiful?" or (laughs). I must admit though that I've started going to opera since Samoans have become opera singers. And I'm beginning to like some of it.

When I went to Japan, I really liked Noh plays, even though I don't understand Japanese at all. It's very ritualized, and very stylized. Even when I didn't understand the language, and a Noh play can run for hours, I would make up the whole play as it went along in my head. Noh theater is very different from Western theater in that the actors all wear masks, which cancel out the individual facial expressions of the actors. And they all shuffle in the same way—that cancels out the differences between the actors as well. They all have a high-pitched voice, not the voice of the actor, and they speak in a stylized manner. Very different, very ritualistic, and I love it. However, I prefer the screenplay form. I love film. Writing the dialogue for *Black Rainbow* should be very interesting, because it's going to be my first film script.

TCP Is that where you see your future work moving, toward writing screen plays?

AW Yes. Some of it.

TCP What then could your fans, those who follow your writing, look forward to in the future?

AW Well, there's the novel *Black Rainbow*. It's got a fast-moving plot, but it's also a serious novel. Every time I try to get philosophical in that novel, I cross it out, I get rid of it. It's an allegorical thriller. I'm also half-way through its sequel, *A Guide to Whistling*. The main character in it is a whistler. It's now about two hundred fifty pages long, and it's going to be about another hundred pages or even longer, then I'll have to cut it down. I also have in mind the third book in the trilogy of the *Black Rainbow*, and that has no title yet. If I write that, it will be the last book. Then I'm through.